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C O N F I D E N T I A L BRATISLAVA 000134

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TAGS: PGOV PREL ECON LO
SUBJECT: PM FICO SHARES THOUGHTS ON DOMESTIC AND
INTERNATIONAL ISSUES

REF: BRATISLAVA 133

Classified By: Ambassador Rodolphe M. Vallee for reasons 1.4 b and d.

¶1. (C) The Ambassador and PM Fico discussed Kosovo (reftel) and other issues over breakfast March 2. Following are some observations and highlights from the meeting.

The Prime Minister/Party Leader

¶2. (C) Fico was a few minutes late to the breakfast and explained that at 7:30 a.m. each morning Smer leaders meet to discuss party issues. He again expressed the difficulty of managing both roles, prime minister and party leader.
(Comment: Leaders of the Hungarian Coalition Party (SMK) confided to EUR DAS Rosemary diCarlo February 28 that, in their recent meetings with European party leaders in Brussels, they learned the European Socialists were planning to continue Smer's suspension because of Smer's continued coalition with the extremist Slovak National Party (SNS). Therefore, Fico does indeed have some major party issues to deal with. End comment.) Fico loses all his public anger and is quite charming in a one-on-one setting.

Coalition Partners

¶3. (C) In response to a question from the Ambassador about why Jan Slota (SNS) was criticizing Defense Minister Kasicky (Slota, strangely, supports a C130 purchase), Fico said coalition partners Slota and Vladimir Meciar (Movement for a Democratic Slovakia--HZDS) have no policy priorities or agenda; for them politics is all about business.

Words Matter

¶4. (C) The Ambassador strongly made the point that Fico's rhetoric does get noticed outside Slovakia and does matter. He conveyed, bluntly, the President's personal displeasure at the anti-U.S. comments Fico made upon the departure of Slovak soldiers from Iraq. The Ambassador pointed out that such rhetoric put at risk the good bilateral relationship our countries have at the working level. Graciously, Fico indicated that he had received and understood the message. He said that the direct communication he had with the Ambassador (and other diplomats) was important to make sure we had a clear understanding of policy stances, which were often misportrayed by the media. It is one of the reasons he makes it a point to attend national day receptions and sporting events where he can encounter diplomatic representatives and share clear messages.

Bulgarian Nurses

¶5. (C) As a case in point, Fico mentioned that while he was in Libya, he firmly and responsibly conveyed the EU message on the Bulgarian nurses. However, media focused on a legal

word he used referring to the nurses during a press conference which can be translated as "perpetrators." Fico lamented, "One word went wrong and now I'm PNG among the Bulgarian public. I am not stupid. I know the impact." He had attended a wine tasting event the previous night in hopes of meeting the Bulgarian ambassador to clear the air and fix the problem. (Comment: Poloff observed that when Fico arrived at the Bulgarian national day reception March 2, he and FM Kubis immediately went into a separate room with the Bulgarian Ambassador and stayed closeted there for over 20 minutes.) He further noted that he explicitly told to the press that he was joking when he said Khaddafi and he discussed "world imperialism," but the press reported this as fact.

Afghanistan

16. (C) Fico referred to the 2/28 cabinet decision to relocate Slovak military engineers from Kabul to Kandahar, pointing out that he had honored his commitment made to the Ambassador in December. In addition, he said, the cabinet authorized participation of 5-7 officers in a PRT, and a slight increase in troops. The Ambassador indicated that we are not completely happy with the caveat that the troops will be confined to the airport at Kandahar, and Fico noted that others (particularly Germany) had expressed similar sentiments. (Comment: Our understanding is that, for now, there is plenty of work do be done on the base, and we are prepared to go back to Slovakia later to try to modify this caveat when deemed necessary.)

Transpetrol

17. (C) Fico acknowledged that the Russians are running out the clock on the Slovak government's ability to veto a sale

of the Transpetrol shares by Yukos' Dutch entities. He plans to raise the issue with Putin when he is in Moscow in early April and ask what the Russian government plans to do about the sale. Fico noted that the GOS is still pursuing the same three objectives for any sale (majority control by the GOS, connection to Schwechat, and an option to further develop the pipeline to allow for Caspian crude). Ambassador passed along the message that Yukos International, whose position was bolstered by a recent Dutch court decision, was interested in meeting with Minister Jahnatek. Fico said that he is not up-to-date on all of the details, but that he would pass along the message to Minister Jahnatek and encourage him to meet with Yukos International officials.

Visas

8 (C) Ambassador explained that FM Kubis' recent public statements on the Visa Waiver process were very optimistic, that the process in our Congress is inherently unpredictable, and progress could still be several years away. Fico responded that he was not all that concerned since only "30,000 Slovaks apply for visas each year" and that this ultimately was not such an important issue for Slovak voters.

(Comment: This calculation probably takes on board the fact that the segment of the population that can afford to travel to the U.S. is more likely to vote for center-right political parties.)

VALLEE